



IDENTITY POLITICS

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Ukraine's Vendée War?

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Organic Tradition or Imperial Glory?

Contradictions and Continuity of Russian Identity Politics

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About the Author

Bruno De Cordier is a professor at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies under the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of Ghent University.

Recommended Reading

- Hiroaki Kuromia, *Freedom and terror in the Donbas—a Ukrainian-Russian borderland, 1870s–1990s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Länder-Analysen und Democratic Initiatives Foundation, “Umfrage: Die ukrainische Bevölkerung zum Donbass-Konflikt”. *Ukraine-Analysen*, Nr. 150, 2015, <www.laender-analysen.de/ukraine/pdf/ukraineanalysen150.pdf>
- For a partisan view on how the current policies of the Ukrainian government amount to the colonization of the country, see Simon Uralow, “Ziele der USA und Hauptaufgaben von Saakaschwili in Odessa”. *Réseau Voltaire*, 15. Juni 2015, <www.voltairenet.org/article187883.html>
- For insurgent or pro-insurgent views:
 - <novorossia.today/de/>,
 - <slavyangrad.de>

ANALYSIS

Organic Tradition or Imperial Glory? Contradictions and Continuity of Russian Identity Politics

Viatcheslav Morozov, Tartu

Abstract

Russian identity politics and, more broadly, the country’s development in modern times has been conditioned by two constitutive splits: between the imperial elites and the peasant masses, on the one hand, and between Russia and Europe, on the other. The current conservative turn aims to overcome the internal split by attuning state policy to mass consciousness, with its alleged preference for ‘traditional values’. This strategy ignores the fact that today’s Russia is a modern, urbanised society. In the long run, it undermines the Kremlin’s effort to achieve and consolidate great power status.

Contemporary Russian identity politics is a rather peculiar combination of familiar elements. Since 2012, the official discourse emphasises ‘traditional values’ and ‘spiritual bonds’, thus referring to the presumed existence of a genuine Russian culture and spirit, uncontaminated by the centuries of Westernising modernisation. At the same time, the Russian state continues to claim continuity with its imperial predecessors, which involves a civilising mission in relation to its own population as well as a claim to the status of great power and to a prominent role in world affairs. The importance of the latter dimension was raised by the interventions in Ukraine and Syria, while the resulting standoff with the West intensified the search for a ‘truly Russian’ Self. The attempts to artificially fuse the imperial and the traditionalist-nationalist narratives are not entirely unprecedented, but have never been particularly successful in the past.

A European Empire vs. the Organic Tradition

In order to appreciate the difficulty of bridging different identity narratives, historical background is absolutely essential. Russia’s development in modern times has been fundamentally conditioned by two constitutive splits: between the imperial elites and the peasant masses, on the one hand, and between Russia and Europe, on the other. According to Geoffrey Hosking, the first split originates in the division between the nobility, who had an obligation to serve the crown in the army or the bureaucracy, and the taxed population. It was introduced by the state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but solidified under Peter I, who forced the elites to adopt European culture and customs. As Alexander Etkind points out, this created a deep divide between the Europeanised, ‘shaven’ Rus-

sians and their 'bearded' compatriots, to the extent that their relations are best described as those between colonisers and colonised.

These developments were driven largely by foreign and security policy considerations. Russia's territory has always been vulnerable to external invaders. The ascent of Western Europe, driven by technological and societal innovation, made Russia feel increasingly exposed on that flank, creating incentives for Europeanisation as a way of catching up with the most advanced countries. However, as Leon Trotsky was first to clearly demonstrate, the geopolitical 'whip of external necessity' did not result in a smooth transplantation of 'progressive' European institutions. Rather, Russia followed a pattern of what Trotsky termed 'combined development': institutional borrowings were adjusted to the needs of a vast empire whose primary task was to control its diverse populations and to mobilise resources for the continuous military effort.

One could argue that combined development was responsible for fact that Russia has never been able to fully integrate into the European civilisational space. Iver Neumann has argued that in their hegemonic position, West Europeans have always been very sensitive to the ways in which other countries were governed: Russia's authoritarian governance was looked upon with suspicion and contempt, and often presented as a threat to the entire European liberal order. The reasons for this suspicion are easy to reconstruct by following the present-day discussion about Moscow's subversive policies in relation to Western democracies. This was the origin of the second major divide mentioned above, between Russia and (the rest of) Europe.

Both splits had constitutive significance for Russian identity. Essentially, the key identity problem Russia has faced since the eighteenth century is whether to Europeanise further, in the hope of eliminating the difference with Europe, or to turn its back to the West and rebuild the society around traditional values, with the elites abandoning their unnecessarily sophisticated culture and embracing a simpler lifestyle of the masses. The first option has always been extremely attractive not just because of the chance to become fully recognised as a European great power, but also as a way to create robust institutions rooted in civil society and thus capable of reigning in the omnipotent, corrupt bureaucracy. Yet this was also risky, since grassroots mobilisation threatened the integrity of the empire, where ethnic Russians constituted less than half of the total population. Even those ethnic Russians were predominantly peasants, culturally alienated from the elites and believed to be unpredictable and prone to rebellion. Finally, the elites were also increasingly fragmented: the emergence

of the democratic *intelligentsia* by the mid-nineteenth century signified a radical challenge to the legitimacy of the state and a growing fragmentation of the public space into mutually hostile circles and groupings.

The second option—going with the people away from Europe—looked safer at first glance but implied forsaking or at least postponing social modernisation. This inevitably put Russia under Trotsky's 'whip of external necessity'. Another, subtler but eventually more fatal, difficulty consisted in the fact that the people were not properly represented in the discursive and political space. The peasants were largely illiterate and did not possess the means to express their 'traditional values' in a way that would enable their political operationalisation. Instead, these values were mostly imagined by the intellectuals, and in particular by the great nineteenth-century Russian literature. This gap began to close down in the early twentieth century, but it certainly would be an exaggeration to say that we know much about the peasants' view of an ideal society, or, indeed, even to claim that peasants shared any comprehensive social utopia going any further than contradictory common-sense views.

Viewed against this background, the current turn in Russian identity politics might seem to be a repetition of the old pattern of conservative reaction following the most recent round of painful and destabilising reforms. However, the current situation is distinct in at least one crucial respect.

Traditionalist Identity for a Modern Society?

As pointed out above, imperial Russia was a deeply fractured society, where the distance between the elites and the masses was so huge that the state effectively had to embark on a civilising—or colonising—mission in relation to its own population, including ethnic Russians. However, the Soviet Union managed to largely complete this mission in relation to the imperial core, roughly consisting of the European part of the Russian Federation (except for North Caucasus), Belarus, Eastern Ukraine and urbanised spaces in Siberia, Kazakhstan and the Far East. Social mobility and displacement caused by the Soviet modernisation and totalitarian repression levelled legal and cultural barriers between social groups. The new hierarchies that came to replace the tsarist ones were much less steep; in addition they were again transformed by the Soviet collapse. Most importantly, however, the Soviets introduced universal standardised secondary education and developed a mass culture that appealed, and was available, to all social strata.

As a result, the post-Soviet Russian society is much more homogenous than any of its predecessors. This is not to say that there is no inequality or that class dif-

ferences have no cultural markers. However, when it comes to questions of national identity, any two Russians would always be able to engage in a conversation and they would be using largely the same discursive codes.

It is impossible to imagine such a conversation in the nineteenth century between an intellectual and a peasant: when the Russian populists decided to 'go to the people' in the 1870s, it took a lot of time and effort even to begin to establish a common language and the trust needed to discuss politics. However, the topics of today's conversation would be largely the same that were discussed by the nineteenth-century Slavophiles and Westernisers, as well as their successors: is Russia a European country? Should it try to catch up with the West or go its own way? Should it be proud or ashamed of its difference from Europe?

Hardly anyone in Russia or beyond would deny the fact that there continue to exist significant differences between Russia and most of the EU-Europe when it comes to how the society is governed, the design and quality of institutions, certain behavioural patterns and so on. This is hardly surprising, given that the country has never been able to break away from the vicious circle of dependent, semi-peripheral development. Stalinist modernisation was in this respect a huge leap forward, but it was mostly based on imported technology (which was exchanged for grain expropriated from the peasants). Late Soviet Union developed an oil addiction, which became even more acute in the post-Soviet period. The state's reliance on rents rather than taxes distorts popular representation, undermines democratic accountability and produces widespread corruption.

While a majority of political and intellectual leaders of contemporary Russia would perhaps agree with the diagnosis, most of them stop short of embracing any radical reform. They do it for the same reason their predecessors did in the nineteenth century: they do not trust their own people. There is a fear that grassroots activism, unless closely supervised by the state, is prone to result in chaos and destruction. This view is sustained by the interpretation of the 1990s as a 'dark age' in Russia's recent history, a modern time of troubles, as well as by the conspirological idea that the West will use any weakness of the state to stage a 'colour revolution' in Moscow.

Thus, instead of talking to the Russian people as enlightened peers, the conservative elites prefer to see them as nineteenth-century peasants who could and should be kept in check through the promotion of Orthodox religion, traditional family and a 'patriotic' view or history where the tsars and their people stand together in some form of spiritual, superhuman unity. Paradoxically, the conservatives are being helped by a large majority of the liberals, who never tire of deploring the barbarianism

they see around themselves. Instead of conceptualising Russia's difference in institutional and historicist terms, as an outcome of a specific pattern of deferred modernisation, Russian Westernisers essentialise this difference as a cultural phenomenon, by attributing it to the persistence of 'peasant consciousness', 'Soviet mentality' or 'the authoritarian Russian mind'. From such essentialism, there is only one step to supporting the regime as something that the Russians actually deserve.

It must be emphasised that while it is the elites who determine the course of the country, the identity discourse behind those decisions is shared by the entire society. In other words, it is not just the leaders who do not trust the masses: in a way, the entire Russian people do not trust themselves. Everyone is eager to repeat the clichés about Russia being a radically, irrationally deviant case. Whether this allegation is taken with gloomy pessimism or self-indulging elation is of secondary importance. Inter alia, this explains the effectiveness of the official propaganda: it is not that everyone believes everything the TV tells them to be true, but most people would say that some brainwashing is necessary for the sake of disciplining fellow citizens, who otherwise might get out of control.

Conclusion

There are limits to the extent to which a modern power with a claim to global leadership can engage in attempts at persuading its population that they are better off as uncivilised natives rather than as modern citizenry. For one, embracing spiritual values might be fine as long as most people still have access to the benefits of modern civilisation, but radical traditionalists are constantly trying to question that. Among the potentially explosive issues are the right to abortion or access to modern communication technologies, both of which in different ways could seriously affect large segments of the population.

Even more important is the fact that the Russian state seems to be at a peak of its international engagement, being involved in the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria as well as in the global standoff with the West. There is an obvious risk of imperial overstretch not unlike those which brought down the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. In combination with the structural economic crisis and a decline in the oil price, this means the need to mobilise all available resources. Eventually—and this is acknowledged by the authorities—making Russia great again necessitates an economic and technological modernisation.

If modernisation is indeed a necessity, the conservative turn might be useful for societal mobilisation, but its short-term benefits are clearly offset by the backward movement in the development of education, health care

and other key elements of social infrastructure. In other words, if the state persists in its promotion of 'traditional values', it will perpetuate the technological and institutional gap between Russia and the developed

world, which will inevitably have consequences in the field of foreign policy. The 'whip of external necessity' is bound to strike again, although it might take time before that happens.

About the Author

Viatcheslav Morozov is Professor of EU-Russia Studies at the University of Tartu. His current research explores how Russia's political and social development has been conditioned by the country's position in the international system. This approach has been laid out in his most recent monograph *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (Palgrave, 2015).

Further reading

- Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Polity, 2011).
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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de • Internet: <www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>